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ABSTRACT

This study of opening and closing interpersonal experiences found that black subjects reported less opening experiences and more closing experiences than the white subjects. Also, black subjects reported less neutral experiences than were reported by white subjects. The opening experience was defined as "one in which the individual manifested an increased responsiveness or reaching out to and for ideas or persons." Closing experiences were described as those interpersonal encounters which resulted in a retreat "from ideas, persons and knowledge of self," while persons reporting a neutral experience showed no evidence of either opening or closing. Responses to an open-ended questionnaire were obtained from 205 eighth-grade students in four public schools of a north-central Florida country. One hundred and thirty-five white and 50 black students reported an interpersonal experience which occurred when the subject was between five and 12 years old and an interpersonal experience which occurred within the two weeks preceding the date of the administration of the questionnaire. (Author)

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OPENING AND CLOSING EXPERIENCES OF BLACKS AND WHITES

A Paper Presented at the 1970 Convention of
the American Personnel and Guidance Association
As Part of the Symposium
Positive Human Experience Theory and Research IV:
The Disadvantaged

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TYPE SUMMARY HERE

A study of opening and closing interpersonal experiences found that black subjects reported less opening experiences and more closing experiences than the white subjects. Also, black subjects reported less neutral experiences than were reported by the white subjects.

The opening experience was defined as "one in which the individual manifested an increased responsiveness or reaching out to and for ideas or persons." Closing experiences were described as those interpersonal encounters which resulted in a retreat "from ideas, persons and knowledge of self," while persons reporting a neutral experience showed no evidence of either opening or closing.

Responses to an open-ended questionnaire were obtained from 205 eighth-grade students in four public schools of a northcentral Florida county. Usable reports were returned by 135 white students and 50 black students. Each subject was asked to report an interpersonal experience which occurred when the subject was between 5 and 12 years old and an interpersonal experience which occurred within the 2 weeks preceding the date of the administration of the questionnaire.

Opening interpersonal experiences which occurred when the subjects were between the ages of 5 and 12 were typically with same-sex peers, were positive experiences, were of longer duration than closing experiences, and were typically a cooperative rather than a competitive activity.

OPENING AND CLOSING EXPERIENCES OF BLACKS AND WHITES

The need for the study of the opening experience is based upon openness as a characteristic of the maximally functioning person. Combs and Snygg (1959) discuss spontaneity and creativity as characteristics of the adequate self and go on to say that the openness of this person "makes possible a capacity for wonder and a sensitivity to events (p. 253)." Also, openness is apparent in Maslow's (1954) account of the self-actualizing person. He describes these individuals as being thrilled by contact with people and events around them. Additional support for openness as a characteristic of the maximally functioning person is provided by Rogers (1961). He describes the person who emerges out of therapy as a person who is open to his experience.

Before continuing to a description of the opening experience we should affirm that openness is both product and process. Maslow (1962) noted that in examining the reports of peak experiences he found increased openness to experience. Also, the description by Rogers (1961) of the open person as more realistic, more tolerant of ambiguity, and more aware of the organism implies a capacity for continued opening.

Definition of Terms

Openness

Rogers (1961) has defined openness as the opposite of defensiveness. Openness indicates an ability on the part of the person to be aware of reality as it exists outside of the person without warping perceptions according to preconceived ideas. Openness is described by Landsman (1961) as the experience of wanting to be known by another. This wanting to be known is characterized as passive openness while a desire to know is described as active openness.

Self Exploration

Self-exploration is the examination by the subject of his feelings as aroused by an experience. In this process the person is exploring the meaning of the experience.

Opening Experience

The opening experience is one in which the individual manifests an increased responsiveness or reaching out to and for ideas or persons. This type of experience allows the person to know his feelings and to seek contacts with other persons and his environment.

Closing Experience

The closing experience is one in which the individual shuts himself off from ideas, persons and knowledge of self. Psychological defensiveness is increased as the result of the closing experience. The person's perceptions become narrow and rigid.

Neutral Experience

The neutral experience shows no evidence of either opening or closing the individual to self, others, or environment.

The Positive-Positive Experience

Positive-positive experiences are those reported or inferred to be pleasurable and enjoyable at the time of the original experience, also these experiences are reported or inferred to arouse similar feelings as they are recalled by the respondent.

The Positive-Negative Experience

Positive-negative experiences are reported or inferred to be pleasurable and enjoyable at the time of the original experience, but these experiences arouse unpleasant and unenjoyable feelings as they are recalled by the respondent.

The Negative-Positive Experience

Negative-positive experiences are reported or inferred to be unpleasant and unenjoyable at the time of the original experience, but the respondent recalls these experiences to have enjoyable and pleasant outcomes.

The Negative-Negative Experience

Negative-negative experiences are inferred or reported to be unpleasant or unenjoyable at the time of the original experience, also these experiences arouse similar feelings as they are recalled by the respondent.

Continuing Relationship

The continuing relationship is one in which the reporting person and the other person or persons have continued to relate to each other for a period of time after the reported experience.

"Only"-Experience Relationship

The "only" experience relationship is a single experience of brief duration in which the reported experience is the only time that these persons meet or relate to each other.

Terminal Relationship

The terminal relationship is one which the respondent reports as being discontinued or ended at the time of the reported experience.

"Doing To" Activity

The "Doing To" interpersonal experience is one in which one person is using the other person or influencing his behavior. In this experience one person is presumably depleted by his interaction with another individual. The activity in the "Doing to" experience is typically competitive.

"Doing With" Activity

The "Doing With" interpersonal experience is one in which the persons are engaged in efforts directed toward their common good. As a result of this interaction both persons are enhanced. The activity in the "Doing With" experience is typically cooperative.

Procedures Used in This Study

The interpersonal experience questionnaire was administered to 205 eighth-grade students in four public junior high schools of Alachua County, Florida. 105 of these subjects were two largely white urban schools, 51 were from a largely white rural school, and 40 were from a largely black urban school. The researcher screened these reports to remove over age subjects, incomplete reports, and reports which were not usable for other reasons. Twenty reports were found to be unusable.

The remaining 185 reports were categorized by the researcher according to the following criteria: sex of the reporting person, race of the reporting person, age at which the past interpersonal experience occurred, and the status (same sex peer, sibling, opposite sex peer, etc.) of the other person in this experience. One panel of judges evaluated the past and recent interpersonal experience reports for degree of opening or closing. A second panel of three judges scored the reports of past interpersonal experiences according to the level of self-exploration. The third panel of judges categorized the past experiences as "doing to" or "doing with," positive or negative, and whether the experience was part of a terminal, an only, or a contuinuing relationship.

Our primary concern today is with the Scale for the Measurement of Opening and Closing Experiences. I have selected a report which is appropriate for each level of the scale. It should be noted that these reports are presented exactly as written by the subjects.

Level 1 The subject indicated dramatic movement toward a closed personality and a continuation up to the present of distrust and desire to shield himself from experiencing. The subject does not desire to contact other persons or to share with them. The environment is seen as harmful and something to be avoided.

Example: It was one night and I parked my bike outside the store. I didn't feel well. As I was coming out of the store a niger jumped on my bike and took off. I chast him for a while then I pick up a big stike and knocked the crap out of him and got my bike back. I felt pretty good about getting my bike but hated that nigger. I don't like niggers anyway and I still don't today because of experiences I've had with them.

Level 2 The subject indicates movement toward closed personality but this movement is not dramatic and may be of short duration.

Example: My brother hit a negro girl. I don't know what grade she's in. They live down just past where we live and so we have to walk together after we get off the bus. She hit him and he hit her back. I felt very scared at first because she screamed like she was really hurt bad. I felt very sorry for my brother because they called the sheriff and my brother looked afraid too. Now everything's all right.

Level 4 The subject indicates movement toward an open personality but this movement is not dramatic and may tend to be short-lived.

Example: I was in the 5th grade and this 11 year old Negro girl lived across the street. We were living in Navy housing at the time, where everybody lives in the same district. At first I was afraid to go out with the other kids and play, because she was playing the games with all the other kids in the neighborhood. Finally one day I got out. We were playing a game. Well here she came, well I decided that I might as well play.

It came to be that she was nice. She happen to be nicer than the other kids. Well I stopped worrying, because I knew that her color didn't mean anything.

I soon learned that you don't judge a person by the color of their skin, but by their personality and attitude.

This was one major lesson that I learned in my life.

I felt that you don't judge a person by his or skin, but their personality.

I felt that I could begin to let people be tested by my judgment, to see what I thought about them.

I soon found out that my kind of friend was a person, that like to work, play and have fun, to be willing to help others, and agree with others, and other assorting things like that.

But now I begin to wonder about people, this stuff in college, the demonstrating makes me wonder. They have no right to destroy property, that other people have worked their whole lives for.

I found out that it isn't the color of the skin or where you were born. It's how you were raised, and your mentallity to think about thing. The responsibility are in peoples hands. But if it goes into the people who don't think. "What will this world come to?"

Level 5 The subject indicated dramatic and pronounced movement toward an open personality. She or he was and is more aware of their environment, more conscious of their feelings, and more trusting of others. The subject indicates a desire to be close to other persons and to receive the stimuli of the environment.

Example: I was talking with a girlfriend of mine out by the duckpond. We were supposed to be talking about our play we were supposed to be writing. We got into a discussion about people and how the group affects everyone and how this might make them appear differently than the way they really are. Then we got onto the subject of love. We tried to determine what was love. They we talked about how I felt about child raising and about how the principles of public schools treat children. We both felt we had discovered a great way about a subject and it made me feel triumphant (in a certain way). I went home feeling good, saying "hi" to everyone I met, and that the world was a great place, and that maybe there were even more people that felt that way I had felt about this certain subject. I concluded that not many grownups would agree with me but I would set out to talk to more kids about it.

Results of the Study

A summary of these reports showed that several factors influenced the opening or closing nature of the interpersonal experience. These factors were the race of the reporting person, the sex and age of the other person in the experience, the positive or negative nature of the experience, the duration of the relationship within which the experience is set, and the nature of the interaction between the persons in the experience. The following table provides a summary of the results.

OPENING AND CLOSING INTERPERSONAL EXPERIENCES REPORTED BY EIGHTH GRADE BLACK AND WHITE STUDENTS

A SUMMARY OF RESULTS

Factors	Statustical Procedure	Results	Confidence Level
Frequency of Opening and Closing Experiences for Black and White Subjects	Complex chi-square (Blacks reported more closing experiences)	7.46	.025
Status of the Other Person and the Nature of the Experience	z for difference of proportions		
	A. Same-sex peers (opening)	3.42	.001
	B. Opposite-sex peers (closing)	18.06	.001
The positive-Negative Variable and the Nature of the Experience	Complex chi-square (Opening experiences were more frequently positive than negative)	83.06	.001
Duration of the Relationship and the Nature of the Experience	Simple chi-square (Opening experiences were part of enduring relationships)	4.12	.05
Type of Activity and the Nature of the Experience	Complex chi-square (Opening experiences displayed cooperative interaction)	12.69	.01

The Relationship of Race to Opening and Closing Experiences

Black youths experience more closing interpersonal experiences than are experienced by white youths. Also, the experiences of black youths are seldom neutral.

Thus the world of the black youth is one of contrast. Interpersonal experiences are clearly defined.

Another implication of the above conclusion is that the black youth is more likely than the white youth to face painful closing interpersonal experiences. Therefore, blacks are more likely to build defenses against open, interpersonal relationships.

Status and Sex of the Other Person in the Experience

Opening interpersonal experiences during the elementary school years are more likely to be with same-sex peers than with any other group of persons reported in this study. During this age span, experiences with opposite-sex peers, siblings, and adults other than parents are predominantly closing experiences. This conclusion is in keeping with the statement by Sullivan (1953) that interpersonal relationships during the "juvenile era" and the "pre-adolescent period" are primarily with same-sex peers.

Therefore, the encouragement of mixed-sex social events prior to adolescence does not appear to be beneficial to the personal development of these young people. However, gangs, clubs and social events which provide opportunities for interaction between same-sex peers seem to be conducive to the development of adolescents who are open and responsive in their relationships with other persons.

Positive and Negative Interpersonal Experiences

Positive interpersonal experiences open children to new understandings of their social and physical environment and to new understandings of themselves. However, negative experiences close the youths to understandings of themselves and the world around them. This conclusion is similar to a conclusion reached by Lunch (1968). He studied the "intense experiences" reported by junior college and graduate students and found pleasurable experiences to be opening but suffering experiences to be closing.

The implication which can be drawn is that children need to experience positive interpersonal relationships. Harsh words and physical punishment may keep the adult in control of the situation, but authoritarian relationships produce what Rokeach (1960) has called the "closed mind." Adults need to be present in the lives of children, but their presence should be marked by positive rather than negative action.

Duration of the Relationship

The interpersonal experiences of children are more likely to be opening if these experiences are parts of enduring relationships. Experiences which are parts of short-duration or terminated relationships are generally closing experiences.

The change in our society from a rural to an urban orientation has brought a change from social and physical stability to social and physical mobility. A question is raised here about the effect this mobility may have upon interpersonal relationships. Adults may find mobility to be stimulating, while children must search for new chums or establish themselves in gangs which have exclusive social organizations. Sullivan's (1953) theory states that the pre-adolescent experiences the first inkling of love in his relationship with the same sex chum. The breaking of this chum relationship or the inability of the child to establish this relationship has serious implications for the development of the individual.

"Doing With" and "Doing To" Activity

Cooperative or "doing with" activity is conducive to opening experiences, while competitive or "doing to" activity is typical of closing interpersonal relationships. People engaged in an opening experience are expressing concern for the welfare of each other. However, each person in a closing experience is attempting to use or subdue the other person.

Children who are taught to value competition are likely to have closing interpersonal relationships with peers and adults, while children who are taught to value cooperation are likely to experience opening relationships. The value which our culture places upon competition and "getting ahead" can interfere with the child's development of sensitivity and appreciation for ideas and feelings.

The "doing with" activity shares the concept of mutuality with Buber's (1958) "I-Thou" relationship. Buber also says that persons in this relationship affect each other; that is, both persons have entered into the relationship to such depth that they are in some way changed persons as a result of the experience. In the "I-Thou" relationship as in the "doing with" activity the participants are focusing on the activity or relationship. This focusing on "other than self" allows a decrease in awareness of self and an increase in communal feelings.

An Examination of Differences of Experiencing Between the Races

A study of the difference of experiencing between the races did not reveal any statistically significant variation in the frequencies of positive or negative experiences, experiences which were part of short-term or continuing relationships and "Doing With" or "Doing To" interaction.

A study of observed and expected frequencies did indicate some trends. Whites reported more experiences with positive outcomes and blacks reported more experiences with negative outcomes than were predicted by the expected frequencies. An examination of the variable of duration of the relationship indicated a trend for blacks to report more short-term and less continuing relationships than the frequencies reported by whites. As in the previous factors, the difference of frequencies between the races for the nature of the interaction were too small to be significant. However, blacks showed a slight trend toward reporting more "Doing With" interactions than would be predicted by the expected frequency while whites tended to report more "Doing To" interactions.

It is interesting that although blacks displayed more closing experiences than whites no significant difference could be found between blacks and whites

on the variables mentioned above. This paradox of significant idfference in the outcomes of the experiences without significant difference in the conditions of the experiences may be explained by an interaction of the conditions. However, this explanation has not been reseached and can only be offered as a suggestion here.

An examination of the opening experiences of blacks and whites did not reveal any significant difference between the races for the frequencies of positive or negative experiencing, the frequencies of continuing or short-term relationships, or the frequencies of "Doing to" and "Doing With" interaction. This study indicates that the process of the opening experience is the same for blacks and whites.

One last observation seems to be appropriate. In 185 reports of interpersonal experiences given by 135 whites and 50 blacks, 5 blacks reported experiences with whites and 8 whites reported experiences with blacks. No explanation, approval, or disapproval is offered here; however, this statistic does indicate a lack of meaningful contact between the races of the subjects in this study.

Conclusion

The conclusion of this study was that among the eighth grade students who wrote reports of pre-junior high school interpersonal experiences no significant difference was indicated between the opening experiences of blacks and whites. Also, this research indicates that the possibility of experiencing opening interpersonal relationships is enhanced if these encounters are positive in nature, a part of an enduring relationship, and are "Doing With: or cooperative interactions.

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